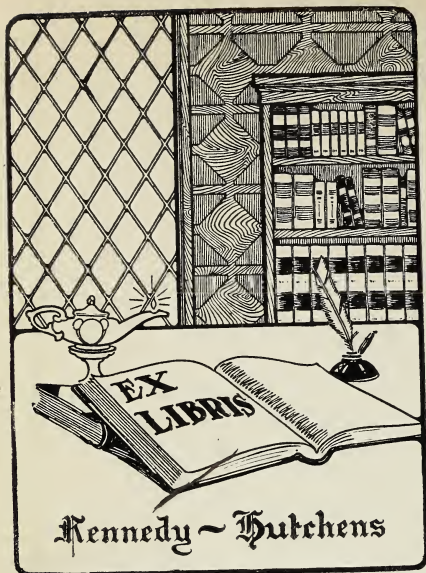


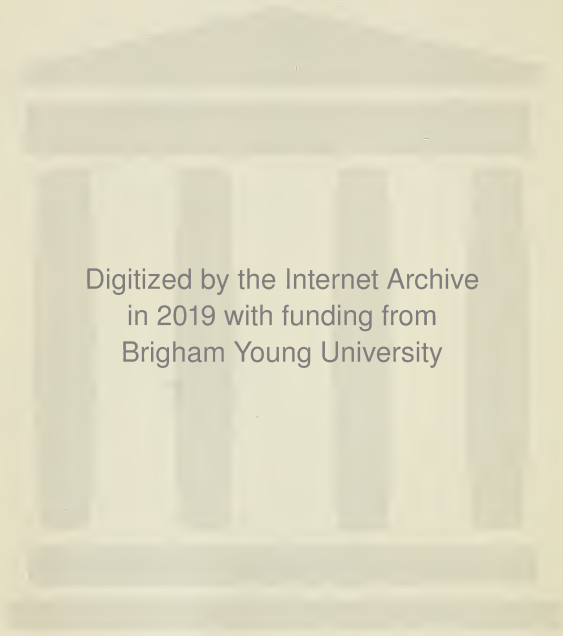
BODY OF THIS DEATH & LOUISE BOGAN

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BODY OF THIS DEATH

“Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

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BODY OF THIS DEATH

POEMS

By LOUISE BOGAN

New York

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY

1923

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To my mother, and to Mathilde Alexander

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A TALE

THIS youth too long has heard the break
Of waters in a land of change.

He goes to see what suns can make
From soil more indurate and strange.

He cuts what holds his days together
And shuts him in, as lock on lock:
The arrowed vane announcing weather,
The tripping racket of a clock;

Seeking, I think, a light that waits
Still as a lamp upon a shelf,—
A land with hills like rocky gates
Where no sea leaps upon itself.

But he will find that nothing dares
To be enduring, save where, south
Of hidden deserts, torn fire glares
On beauty with a rusted mouth,—

Where something dreadful and another
Look quietly upon each other.

DECORATION

A MACAW preens upon a branch outspread
With jewelry of seed. He's deaf and mute.
The sky behind him splits like gorgeous fruit
And claw-like leaves clutch light till it has bled.
The raw diagonal bounty of his wings
Scrapes on the eye color too chafed. He beats
A flattered tail out against gauzy heats;
He has the frustrate look of cheated kings.
And all the simple evening passes by:
A gillyflower spans its little height
And lovers with their mouths press out their grief.
The bird fans wide his striped regality
Prismatic, while against a sky breath-white
A crystal tree lets fall a crystal leaf.

MEDUSA

I HAD come to the house, in a cave of trees,
Facing a sheer sky.
Everything moved,—a bell hung ready to strike,
Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me
And the hissing hair,
Held up at a window, seen through a door.
The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead
Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.
Nothing will ever stir.
The end will never brighten it more than this,
Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,
And the tipped bell make no sound.
The grass will always be growing for hay
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,
And does not drift away.

SUB CONTRA

NOTES on the tuned frame of strings
Plucked or silenced under the hand
Whimper lightly to the ear,
Delicate and involute,
Like the mockery in a shell.
Lest the brain forget the thunder
The roused heart once made it hear,—
Rising as that clamor fell,—
Let there sound from music's root
One note rage can understand,
A fine noise of riven things.
Build there some thick chord of wonder;
Then, for every passion's sake,
Beat upon it till it break.

A LETTER

I CAME here, being stricken, stumbling out
At last from streets; the sun, decreasing, took me
For days, the time being the last of autumn,
The thickets not yet stark, but quivering
With tiny colors, like some brush strokes in
The manner of the pointillists; small yellows
Dart shaped, little reds in different pattern,
Clicks and notches of color on threaded bushes,
A cracked and fluent heaven, and a brown earth.
I had these, and my food and sleep—enough.

This is a countryside of roofless houses,—
Taverns to rain,—doorsteps of millstones, lintels
Leaning and delicate, foundations sprung to lilacs,
Orchards where boughs like roots strike into the sky.
Here I could well devise the journey to nothing,
At night getting down from the wagon by the black barns,
The zenith a point of darkness, breaking to bits,
Showering motionless stars over the houses.
Scenes relentless—the black and white grooves of a woodcut.

But why the journey to nothing or any desire?
Why the heart taken by even senseless adventure,
The goal a coffer of dust? Give my mouth to the air,
Let arrogant pain lick my flesh with a tongue
Rough as a cat's; remember the smell of cold mornings,
The dried beauty of women, the exquisite skin
Under the chins of young girls, young men's rough beards,—
The cringing promise of this one, that one's apology
For the knife struck down to the bone, gladioli in sick rooms,
Asters and dahlias, flowers like ruches, rosettes. . .

Forever enough to part grass over the stones
By some brook or well, the lovely seed-shedding stalks;
To hear in the single wind diverse branches
Repeating their sounds to the sky—that sky like scaled mackerel,
Fleeing the fields—to be defended from silence,
To feel my body as arid, as safe as a twig
Broken away from whatever growth could snare it
Up to a spring, or hold it softly in summer
Or beat it under in snow.

I must get well.

Walk on strong legs, leap the hurdles of sense,
Reason again, come back to my old patchwork logic,
Addition, subtraction, money, clothes, clocks,
Memories (freesias, smelling slightly of snow and of flesh
In a room with blue curtains) ambition, despair.
I must feel again who had given feeling over,
Challenge laughter, take tears, play the piano,
Form judgments, blame a crude world for disaster.

To escape is nothing. Not to escape is nothing.
The farmer's wife stands with a halo of darkness
Rounding her head. Water drips in the kitchen
Tapping the sink. To-day the maples have split
Limb from the trunk with the ice, a fresh wooden wound.
The vines are distorted with ice, ice burdens the breaking
Roofs I have told you of.

Shall I play the pavanne
For a dead child or the scene where that girl
Lies fall her hair, and the loud chords descend
As though her hair were metal, clashing along
Over the tower, and a dumb chord receives it?
This may be wisdom: abstinence, beauty is nothing,
That you regret me, that I feign defiance.
And now I have written you this, it is nothing.



THE FRIGHTENED MAN

IN fear of the rich mouth
I kissed the thin,—
Even that was a trap
To snare me in.

Even she, so long
The frail, the scentless,
Is become strong
And proves relentless.

O, forget her praise,
And how I sought her
Through a hazardous maze
By shafted water.

BETROTHED

You have put your two hands upon me, and your mouth,
You have said my name as a prayer.
Here where trees are planted by the water
I have watched your eyes, cleansed from regret,
And your lips, closed over all that love cannot say.

My mother remembers the agony of her womb
And long years that seemed to promise more than this.
She says, "You do not love me,
You do not want me,
You will go away."

In the country whereto I go
I shall not see the face of my friend
Nor her hair the color of sunburnt grasses;
Together we shall not find
The land on whose hills bends the new moon
In air traversed of birds.

What have I thought of love?
I have said, "It is beauty and sorrow."
I have thought that it would bring me lost delights, and splendor
As a wind out of old time. . .

But there is only the evening here,
And the sound of willows
Now and again dipping their long oval leaves in the water.

WORDS FOR DEPARTURE

Nothing was remembered, nothing forgotten.
When we awoke, wagons were passing on the warm summer
pavements,
The window-sills were wet from rain in the night,
Birds scattered and settled over chimneypots
As among grotesque trees.

Nothing was accepted, nothing looked beyond.
Slight-voiced bells separated hour from hour,
The afternoon sifted coolness
And people drew together in streets becoming deserted.
There was a moon, and light in a shop-front,
And dusk falling like precipitous water.

Hand clasped hand,
Forehead still bowed to forehead—
Nothing was lost, nothing possessed,
There was no gift nor denial.

2.

I have remembered you.
You were not the town visited once,
Nor the road falling behind running feet.

You were as awkward as flesh
And lighter than frost or ashes.

You were the rind,
And the white-juiced apple,
The song, and the words waiting for music.

You have learned the beginning;
Go from mine to the other.

Be together; eat, dance, despair,
Sleep, be threatened, endure.
You will know the way of that.

But at the end, be insolent;
Be absurd—strike the thing short off;
Be mad—only do not let talk
Wear the bloom from silence.

And go away without fire or lantern.
Let there be some uncertainty about your departure.



AD CASTITATEM

I MAKE the old sign.

I invoke you,
Chastity.

Life moves no more
A breeze of flame.

Alike upon the ground
Struck by the same withering
Lie the fruitful and the barren branch.

Alike over them
Closes the mould.

I call upon you,
Who have not known you;

I invoke you,
Stranger though I be.
Against this blackened heart
I hold your offerings—
Water, and a stone.

In this ravaged country,
In this season not yours,
You having no season,
I call upon you without echo.
Hear me, infertile,
Beautiful futility.

KNOWLEDGE

Now that I know
How passion warms little
Of flesh in the mould,
And treasure is brittle,—

I'll lie here and learn
How, over their ground,
Trees make a long shadow
And a light sound.

PORTRAIT

SHE has no need to fear the fall
Of harvest from the laddered reach
Of orchards, nor the tide gone ebbing
 From the steep beach.

Nor hold to pain's effrontery
Her body's bulwark, stern and savage,
Nor be a glass, where to forsee
 Another's ravage.

What she has gathered, and what lost,
She will not find to lose again.
She is possessed by time, who once
 Was loved by men.

THE ROMANTIC

ADMIT the ruse to fix and name her chaste
With those who sleep the spring through, one and one,
Cool nights, when laurel builds up, without haste,
Its precise flower, like a pentagon.

In her obedient breast, all that ran free
You thought to bind, like echoes in a shell.
At the year's end, you promised, it would be
The unstrung leaves, and not her heart, that fell.

So the year broke and vanished on the screen
You cast about her; summer went to haws.
This, by your leave, is what she should have been,—
Another man will tell you what she was.

MY VOICE NOT BEING PROUD

My voice, not being proud
Like a strong woman's, that cries
Imperiously aloud
That death disarm her, lull her—
Screams for no mourning color
Laid menacingly, like fire,
Over my long desire.
It will end, and leave no print.
As you lie, I shall lie:
Separate, eased, and cured.
Whatever is wasted or wanted
In this country of glass and flint
Some garden will use, once planted.
As you lie alone, I shall lie,
O, in singleness assured,
Deafened by mire and lime.
I remember, while there is time.

STATUE AND BIRDS

HERE, in the withered arbor, like the arrested wind,
Straight sides, carven knees,
Stands the statue, with hands flung out in alarm
Or remonstrances.

Over the lintel sway the woven bracts of the vine
In a pattern of angles.
The quill of the fountain falters, woods rake on the sky
Their brusque tangles.

The birds walk by slowly, circling the marble girl,
The golden quails,
The pheasants, closed up in their arrowy wings,
Dragging their sharp tails.

The inquietudes of the sap and of the blood are spent.
What is forsaken will rest.
But her heel is lifted,—she would flee,—the whistle of the birds
Fails on her breast.

EPITAPH FOR A ROMANTIC WOMAN

SHE has attained the permanence
She dreamed of, where old stones lie sunning.
Untended stalks blow over her
Even and swift, like young men running.

Always in the heart she loved
Others had lived,—she heard their laughter.
She lies where none has lain before,
Where certainly none will follow after.

THE ALCHEMIST

I BURNED my life, that I might find
A passion wholly of the mind,
Thought divorced from eye and bone,
Ecstasy come to breath alone.
I broke my life, to seek relief
From the flawed light of love and grief.

With mounting beat the utter fire
Charred existence and desire.
It died low, ceased its sudden thresh.
I had found unmysterious flesh—
Not the mind's avid substance—still
Passionate beyond the will.

MEN LOVED WHOLLY BEYOND WISDOM

MEN loved wholly beyond wisdom
Have the staff without the banner.
Like a fire in a dry thicket
Rising within women's eyes
Is the love men must return.
Heart, so subtle now, and trembling,
What a marvel to be wise,
To love never in this manner !
To be quiet in the fern
Like a thing gone dead and still,
Listening to the prisoned cricket
Shake its terrible, dissembling
Music in the granite hill.

THE CROWS

THE woman who has grown old
And knows desire must die,
Yet turns to love again,
Hears the crows' cry.

She is a stem long hardened,
A weed that no scythe mows.
The heart's laughter will be to her
The crying of the crows.

Who slide in the air with the same voice
Over what yields not, and what yields,
Alike in spring, and when there is only bitter
Winter-burning in the fields.

MEMORY

Do not guard this as rich stuff without mark
Closed in a cedarn dark,
Nor lay it down with tragic masks and greaves,
Licked by the tongues of leaves.

Nor let it be as eggs under the wings
Of helpless, startled things,
Nor encompassed by song, nor any glory
Perverse and transitory.

Rather, like shards and straw upon coarse ground,
Of little worth when found,—
Rubble in gardens, it and stones alike,
That any spade may strike.

WOMEN

WOMEN have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.

They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,
They do not hear
Snow water going down under culverts
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,
They stiffen, when they should bend.
They use against themselves that benevolence
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them
A shout and a cry.
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills
They should let it go by.

LAST HILL IN A VISTA

COME, let us tell the weeds in ditches
How we are poor, who once had riches,
And lie out in the sparse and sodden
Pastures that the cows have trodden,
The while an autumn night seals down
The comforts of the wooden town.

Come, let us counsel some cold stranger
How we sought safety, but loved danger.
So, with stiff walls about us, we
Chose this more fragile boundary:
Hills, where light poplars, the firm oak,
Loosen into a little smoke.

SONG

Love me because I am lost;
Love me that I am undone.
That is brave,—no man has wished it,
Not one.

Be strong, to look on my heart
As others look on my face.
Love me,—I tell you that it is a ravaged
Terrible place.

STANZA

No LONGER burn the hands that seized
Small wreaths from branches scarcely green.
Wearily sleeps the hardy, lean
Hunger that could not be appeased.
The eyes that opened to white day
Watch cloud that men may look upon:
Leda forgets the wings of the swan;
Danaë has swept the gold away.

THE CHANGED WOMAN

THE light flower leaves its little core
Begun upon the waiting bough.
Again she bears what she once bore
And what she knew she re-learns now.

The cracked glass fuses at a touch.
The wound heals over, and is set
In the whole flesh, and is not much
Quite to remember or forget.

Rocket and tree, and dome and bubble
Again behind her freshened eyes
Are treacherous. She need not trouble.
Her lids will know them when she dies.

And while she lives, the unwise, heady
Dream, ever denied and driven,
Will one day find her bosom ready,—
That never thought to be forgiven.

CHANSON UN PEU NAÏVE

What body can be ploughed,
Sown, and broken yearly?
She would not die, she vowed,
But she has, nearly.

Sing, heart sing;
Call and carol clearly.

And, since she could not die,
Care would be a feather,
A film over the eye
Of two that lie together.

Fly, song, fly,
Break your little tether.

So from strength concealed
She makes her pretty boast:
Plain is a furrow healed
And she may love you most.

Cry, song, cry,
And hear your crying lost.

FIFTEENTH FAREWELL

I

You may have all things from me, save my breath.
The slight life in my throat will not give pause
For your love, nor your loss, nor any cause.
Shall I be made a panderer to death,
Dig the green ground for darkness underneath,
Let the dust serve me, covering all that was
With all that will be? Better, from time's claws,
The hardened face under the subtle wreath.

Cooler than stones in wells, sweeter, more kind
Than hot, perfidious words, my breathing moves
Close to my plunging blood. Be strong, and hang
Unriven mist over my breast and mind,
My breath! We shall forget the heart that loves,
Though in my body beat its blade, and its fang.

II

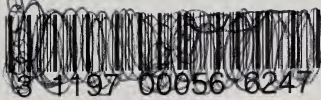
I erred, when I thought loneliness the wide
Scent of mown grass over forsaken fields,
Or any shadow isolation yields.
Loneliness was the heart within your side.
Your thought, beyond my touch, was tilted air
Ringed with as many borders as the wind.
How could I judge you gentle or unkind
When all bright flying space was in your care?

Now that I leave you, I shall be made lonely
By simple empty days,—never that chill
Resonant heart to strike between my arms
Again, as though distraught for distance,—only
Levels of evening, now, behind a hill,
Or a late cock-crow from the darkening farms.

SONNET

*Since you would claim the sources of my thought
Recall the meshes whence it sprang unlimed,
The reedy traps which other hands have timed
To close upon it. Conjure up the hot
Blaze that it cleared so cleanly, or the snow
Devised to strike it down. It will be free.
Whatever nets draw in to prison me
At length your eyes must turn to watch it go.*

*My mouth, perhaps, may learn one thing too well,
My body hear no echo save its own,
Yet will the desperate mind, maddened and proud,
Seek out the storm, escape the bitter spell
That we obey, strain to the wind, be thrown
Straight to its freedom in the thunderous cloud.*



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